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The Philadelphia Inquirer

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NEWS AROUND THE CLOCK philly.com

Child maimed on tracks, again

Two children, three severed legs. In less than two months.

In both instances, trains struck Philadelphia kids. Babies, really. Each had been hanging around tracks when passing railcars caught their attention and they somehow wound up beneath them, bloodied and mangled. Scarred forever. Lucky to be alive. Both will need prosthetic devices just to walk again.



JENICE ARMSTRONG

How does something like that happen? And not once, but twice in the same city in such a short span of time? I've written about an aspiring dancer struck by a train June 7 in Southwest Philadelphia. Sienna Ward, now 12, lost one leg in the accident and the other after infection set in. After she started feeling better, I moved on.

Then I heard last week about Mustafa Elmitwalli's accident. My first thought was: "Not again!"

The 14-year-old had been with his cousin and only about 100 yards from his cousin's house when See **ARMSTRONG** on B3



Lawyer Joseph Montgomery shows how easy it is to access tracks in Frankford. JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

COMMENTARY | BY JENICE ARMSTRONG

Again, a Phila. child is maimed on tracks

ARMSTRONG from B1 he was hit last week. Mustafa's mother, Elizabeth Colon, had been chatting with him by phone only moments earlier. The family had plans to go to the movies, but shortly after Colon hung up, they got word that Mustafa had been hit by a train.

After his leg was severed, Mustafa reportedly got up and hopped on one leg to safety, and passersby hastily fashioned a tourniquet that helped slow his bleeding. Doctors at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children were unable to reattach his leg.

I met with Mustafa's stepfather on Monday at Castor and Sedgley Avenues in Frankford, near where the accident happened. Jose Colon pointed out a concrete ledge jutting out from an overpass that can serve as steps to the tracks. He jumped up on it to show me just how easy it is to scale.

Colon pointed out that barbed wire could prevent pedestrians from crawling on the ledge up to the tracks. Judging from all the trash and drug paraphernalia, a lot of people do that. Once you've climbed up there, you're secluded from the street. You can look out over the traffic passing underneath. Nearby trees offer a little respite from the hot concrete. And then, there's the allure of watching trains go by.

Mustafa, who just finished the eighth grade at Baldi Middle

School, doesn't recall the moments before the accident.

"He's doing fine. He's actually doing fine. He's a fighter," Colon told me. "They changed the bandage today. He's fine. And everything looks good."

Just then, a train went by. Colon paused and watched for a moment before telling me that the enormity of what happened hasn't completely registered with Mustafa.

"I think what's going to happen is when he gets home and it hits him ... and he sees everybody outside riding bikes and popping wheelies," Colon said. "He's going to have to sit on the porch on the sidelines for now."

He needs another surgery to close the wound, followed by rehabilitation therapy that could last a couple of months. According to Operation Lifesaver, about every three hours a person or vehicle is hit by a train. Many of these accidents are preventable.

But a lot of times, kids don't know the hazards. Or that playing on train tracks is considered trespassing.

Parents, remind your kids to stay away from railroad tracks. If you have to grip them by the neck so they get the message, do it.

It could save a life — or a leg.

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